

# The Paradox of My Positions

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*Version 1.6 (posted on 30 November 2021)*

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As I barrel down the tunnel of my elderhood, my public writing reflects an ever-deepening paradox. I want to make that paradox crystal clear.

I am pessimistic about the future, both my own and humanity's. That's been true since my late adolescence, but the depth and breadth of my pessimism has grown substantially over the first two decades of the 21st century.

Part of that is personal. I'm now officially old — chronologically, physically, and psychologically. When people say, "You're as young [or old] as you feel," I laugh. If that's correct, I should be dead already. Actually, it's a wonder that I'm still here, given all the bad shit that's happened to me. Some of that was my own fault — foolishness, stupidity, bad habits, whatever. Other very unpleasant events were "acts of God" or fate (such as being a passenger in a 70-mph head-on collision on the highway when I was 26). And some may have been just the luck of the draw. You know, we play the hands we're dealt as well as we can. Sometimes we win, but sometimes we lose.

I tell myself that the physical suffering that's been a near-constant companion over my life, and increasingly so throughout my adult life, does not make me special, that damn near everyone suffers more than we realize or appreciate. This is certainly true of physical suffering, but it probably applies to psychological and emotional suffering as well. Although some people suffer quite loudly, most folks tend to hide their angst. In addition, we lack adequate languages to talk about pain, so we may not be able to effectively communicate much about our suffering even when we want to. Yes, the reality of other people's suffering may sometimes be inferred from their behavior, but that's not always apparent and is frequently quite dicey to get right.

I tell myself also that my own sufferings are an ongoing teaching to encourage (or force) me to develop deeper empathy and more compassion for others. Sure, that's just another metaphysical narrative among the many stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, but that one resonates strongly for me. I don't exactly like it, but it provides meaningful consolation, so I'm sticking by it.

As for humanity, I thought for a long time that we had a shot at making things better. That came together for me during my adolescence in the mid- to late-

1960s. Now, I've come to understand a little more about why so many people absolutely hated the 1960s. From their perspective, that whole turbulent decade was a time of rebellion, wreck, and ruin, where traditional values crumbled under a merciless assault by, well, the devil, in one form or another. The status quo took it on the chin in that decade, so if you liked the status quo, you hated the 1960s.

Not so for me, though. I came of age in that decade. As the egg of culture was cracked, I got born in a way that was joyous, liberating, and empowering. Much of this was actually fleshed out for me in the 1970s, but I look back to the 1960s to see where it started. That decade gave me hope that, speaking in collective terms, we might actually get our heads screwed on straight, that we might be able to awaken from the various hypnotic trances from which civilization has suffered so grievously and foisted on tens of millions of human beings so cruelly, but about which there has been widespread denial historically. I am frankly astonished at the rampant cheerleading for bullshit that goes on — *"Civilization is great! The status quo is fine!"* No, civilization hasn't been great, and the status quo is not fine, not by a long shot.

By the end of the 1970s, the tide was turning, and I could see and feel the shift. Despite that decade having been pretty darned good for me personally (my 20s were a gas!), I could plainly sense that the people who liked Death Culture had marshaled their forces and begun to fight back very effectively. Not that the monsters had ever been close to defeat, but they didn't like being challenged, and they wanted the Empire to win. Many signs pointed to their resurgence: the malling of America and the dramatic spread of consumer culture, the resurgent rise and politicization of fundamentalist Christianity, the proliferation of Right-Wing Think Tanks and the onset of equally toxic Right-Wing Talk Radio, all of which was marketed brilliantly to a gullible public that ate it up. Fucking disco, for Christ's sake! The handwriting was on the wall. This country wasn't evolving as I had hoped.

The '80s brought Reagan and Morning in America, along with a wholesale selling out for money to Wall Street, ending with Bush the Elder and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The '90s were ushered in with the first Gulf War, then Bill Clinton and his whole triangulation, Republican-Lite shtick — NAFTA, repeal of Glass-Steagall that had kept the banks in check, end of welfare, expansion of prisons, the whole nine yards. Although it seemed to me that we were headed down the road to perdition, I still held out some faint hope that America might turn away from the dark side. After that, though, the millennium change new century marched in, kicked off by a stolen Presidency that was wrongly blamed on the only decent candidate (Nader), which was followed a year later by 9-11 and all the madness that ensued. Since then, it's all been straight downhill.

A lot of what went wrong can be attributed to the corruption of the Left and the abandonment of the working class by the Democrats, but I don't really want to

dwel on that. Basically, the monsters were just way better at getting what they wanted, which was achieved in large part by convincing the American public to believe their lies, mostly by packaging them in grievance-based wrappers that played to people's fears. The monsters were brilliant at that, and they still are.

I suppose Watergate and Nixon's resignation in the mid-1970s were the high-water mark for my shaky and never-very-confident optimism about the possibility of our collectively turning away from madness. That was 47 years ago, however, and it's been a long, nasty slide since then. Despite the occasional ray of sunshine slicing through the overcast to offer a momentary glimmer of hope, our embrace of insanity has been relentless and gloomy.

While the political/cultural Right has obviously led the parade to Crazy Town, the Center and Left have provided neither counterbalance nor refuge. The entire enterprise of the American Empire has remained obstinate in a consistent path, staying locked in a channel bounded on one side by tragedy and on the other by farce. In both our questionable policies and our misdirected passions, the country appears to veer between those two drama masks, careening from one to the other. Oddly enough, this has tended to occur with surprising banality, under the dubious heading of "business-as-usual."

Readers of my commentaries may have noticed a seeming turn in the recent tone of my writing. Essay titles such as "The Monsters Have Won" could easily be interpreted as indicating a more pessimistic and less hopeful attitude. This is generally more a shift in editorial policy, however, rather than an inward change of heart. How I feel these days about the world isn't fundamentally different from my feelings of years and decades past. The personal suffering that comes with advancing age and ill health have taken their toll, but my attitudes toward civilization and our collective future haven't shifted much. Yes, hope finally died, or maybe I pulled the plug of life-support for that comatose patient — I can't quite tell which. But that wasn't really unexpected. In my view, the odds were always against us, and against hope as well.

In my natal chart, Jupiter is 2° above my last-degree Capricorn Ascendant. Among the many possible interpretations of that alignment I see in myself, one that's been historically relevant is the tendency to speak and write in a ministerial fashion, as if I were delivering a sermon from the pulpit. Many sermons close on a note of optimism or inspirational uplift, and I've done that time and again, decade after decade.

But something has shifted over the past two years, and dramatically over recent months. Maybe it's me, maybe it's the zeitgeist, or perhaps both. Whatever it is has provoked a greater, more urgent desire in myself to not beat around the bush and, instead, call a spade a spade. I no longer feel a need to hide my pessimism, nor to tone down my despair.

OK, so where's the paradox? (Thank heaven we've finally arrived there after three pages...)

Hope is dead. There's not a snowball's chance in hell that this species is going to get its act together sanely in time to prevent any of the catastrophes waiting to engulf us. Zero. Nada. Zip. Zilch. I can't avoid concluding that we're screwed.

Where we find ourselves is the rough equivalent of a football game entering the fourth quarter with our team down by five touchdowns and getting the stuffing beat out of us. It's "The Bad News Bears" times ten. And yet, we cannot give up. We can't throw down our helmets and gloves, leave the field, and drive home. Nope. We must continue to act as if the game were still winnable (even though it's not) and play it out as well as we are able, all the way to the bitter end.

Why? Because that's the right thing to do. Ditch the Little League sports metaphor and go directly to the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. The one I'm talking about here is Right Action — doing the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do.

Doing the right thing may on occasion be a means to a happy end, and obviously people typically want it to be, but that doesn't matter and may even end up getting in our way. We do lots of things to achieve a hoped-for result, but that's not what Right Action is about. Right Action is an end in itself. It doesn't have to work or succeed or turn a profit or change the world for the better.

Even in the face of imminent doom, disaster, and collapse, I still believe that we should do our best to honor Right Action. Why? Because it's the right thing to do. As befits my Jupiter just above the Ascendant, that moral imperative still holds.

The difference between where I am now and where I was 50 years ago is that I no longer hold out any hope that doing the right thing will save us. And in a way that's downright paradoxical and may even qualify as perverse, that might be a good thing, or at least not as bad a thing as it seems on the surface.

Maybe doing whatever we do without any attachment to results really is a better and truer way to live. No illusions, no contingencies, no bargaining with God or deals with the Devil. Just simple Right Action for its own sake.

So, keep up the good fight. Do the best you can to be loving and compassionate, to not become a monster, and to act with integrity. Engage in Right Action whenever possible. And then the chips can fall where they may, and it's still OK, or, at the very least, as OK as we know how to make it.